

White, W. L. (2013). Recovery journalism in Philadelphia: An interview with Jose DeLeon, Gil Gadson, Brooke Feldman, and Tom Qualters. Posted at [www.facesandvoicesofrecovery.org](http://www.facesandvoicesofrecovery.org) and [www.williamwhitepapers.com](http://www.williamwhitepapers.com)

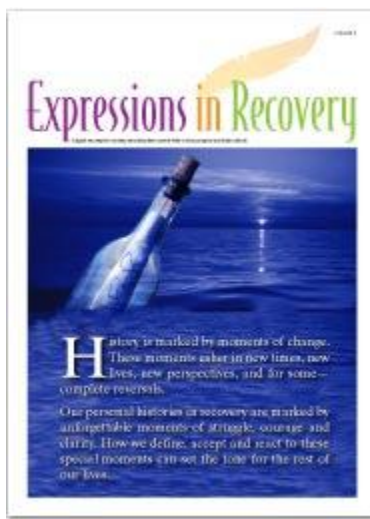
## Recovery Journalism in Philadelphia: An Interview with Jose DeLeon, Gil Gadson, Brooke Feldman, and Tom Qualters

William L. White, MA

### Introduction

No city in the world has done more than Philadelphia to mobilize the talents and service ethic of people in addiction recovery. What began as an effort to increase the recovery orientation of addiction treatment in Philadelphia evolved into a much broader process through which the hope of recovery is being expressed through sports, art, music, and major recovery celebration events. These processes of personal healing and cultural renewal are being led by and on behalf of people in recovery.

In early 2013, I had the opportunity to interview four people who are contributing to this recovery revolution through a growing body of their writings. Jose DeLeon is a contributor and Tom Qualters the creator, editor, and contributor to the NET-STEPs patient newsletter of Philadelphia's Northeast Treatment Center. Gil Gadson is Editor of *Expressions in Recovery*, a newsletter of the Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disability Services. *Expressions* is dedicated to the proposition that "anything we strive to achieve is possible" within the journey of recovery and resilience. Brooke Feldman is a regular contributor to the Philadelphia-based newsletter, *The 12 Step Gazette*.



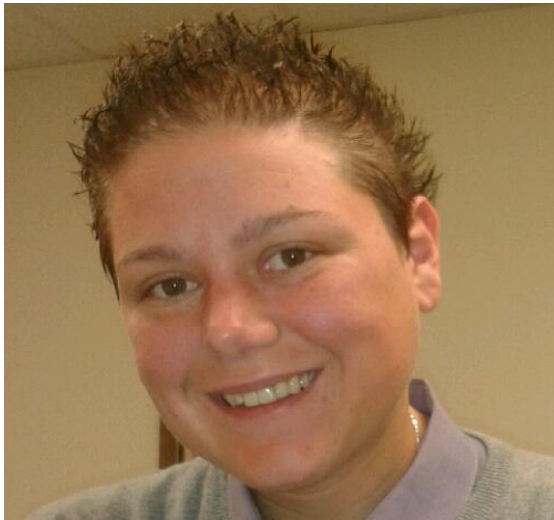
Please join us in this discussion of writing as a tool for personal healing and recovery advocacy and reflect on whether this might be a new or renewed avenue of expression and service in the years to come.

## Writing Origins

**Bill White:** *First, I would like to thank each of you for your willingness to share your experience as writers in recovery. Did you write before you got into recovery?*



**Gil Gadson:** Before I got in recovery, I wrote when it facilitated other interests. I wrote poems and letters to those I cared about, and I wrote songs.



**Brooke Feldman:** I have been writing for as far back as I can remember. Writing poems, songs, fictional stories, or a screenplay or maintaining a journal were all outlets for me. Even as I entered and dwelled in my days of active addiction, I continued writing.



**Jose DeLeon:** I attempted to write a book during one of my two State Prison sentences, but my writing never evolved into anything of importance before I got into recovery.



**Tom Qualters:** I've been writing since my sophomore year in High School. Most of it was writing on personal topics that I never intended anyone to see.

**Bill White:** *Did your motivation for writing or your writing process change once you were in recovery?*

**Tom Qualters:** I guess it did. I have become very passionate about what I write now. What surprised me during my recovery journey and continues to surprise me today is the lack of knowledge that we as addicts have about our own disease. When I started researching my addiction, I was stunned by how little I actually knew about it. Coming from a medical background, I figured I already knew a lot. Man, was I wrong.

**Gil Gadson:** Once in recovery, my priorities and outlook on life completely changed. Recovery was the sole catalyst that sparked a hunger to write. It was then that my reasons to write became bell clear and took on a sharply defined purpose.

**Brooke Feldman:** My motivation to write certainly increased in recovery although there were some struggles around “getting into the zone” without the use of a mind altering substance. In looking back, I credit the act of pushing through these struggles to the rule of maintaining a daily journal while living in a Recovery Residence for the first nine months of my recovery. This forced me to continue to write despite the challenges my newfound clear head posed. As my recovery journey progressed, I saw the gift of writing as an unactualized potential. This fueled my motivation to write.

**Jose DeLeon:** Once I entered recovery, I felt that there were “real” issues that I could address through writing. For me, talking about issues was not enough, and my writing could reach places my words could not. That’s when my writing really took off.

**Bill White:** *How did each of you decide to use writing as a tool for recovery advocacy?*

**Jose DeLeon:** About two and a half years ago, John Carroll, Director of NET-Steps, asked me to do some research about NA/AA’s discriminatory views on Methadone and write an article about it. That was all it took to get me started. I was shocked at what I had learned and I have been writing ever since.

**Tom Qualters:** For me, writing has always been an outlet, regardless if I was writing a paper for school or just writing a poem that I knew no one else would ever read. I’ve always been able to write my feelings down in a way that has become therapeutic for me. My writing has become one of the BIGGEST tools I have in my recovery arsenal. There are many issues that affect persons in recovery that go unanswered because of lack of available resources, lack of knowledge, and unfortunately because of the fear and stigma that go hand in hand with addiction. Given the opportunity I have through writing the newsletter, I feel it’s almost my responsibility to write articles that educate or articles that let other addicts know that they’re not alone and that it’s alright to have some of the feelings and fears that bubble up to the surface during early recovery.

**Brooke Feldman:** For me, the decision to use writing as a tool for recovery advocacy has been more of an organic movement than a conscious decision. I have always been passionate about writing as both a form of self-expression and an effective mechanism for deeper communication

with a larger audience. As my passion for the recovery advocacy movement has grown over the past five or six years, this has naturally merged with my already existing passion for writing.

**Gil Gadson:** Others in recovery told me that I expressed myself well and that what I had to say touched others. A central part of recovery is sharing, and once I saw that I could reach more than just the ones in front of me through my writing, it became a tool of advocacy.

**Bill White:** *Has writing played a role in your recoveries?*

**Brooke Feldman:** Writing has played an active role in my own personal recovery journey as a means of self-expression and as a tool for getting thoughts, feelings, and ideas out of my head. I imagine many writers would agree that it is often only through the written word that they feel truly understood. For me, writing has helped me convey my thoughts, feelings, and ideas in a way that allows me to feel truly understood. Additionally, using my writing to inspire hope or be a recovery advocate has been a critical part of my being in service to others.

**Jose DeLeon:** That's similar for me as well. I've learned how to put my frustrations into my articles that tend to snowball into something positive. Some people have their journals while I have my articles.

**Tom Qualters:** Writing has played a HUGE role in my recovery. As an addict, I have always looked for ways to either hide or ignore my feelings. Drugs played a very large part in helping me accomplish this. Through writing, I have been able to start opening up about myself, my feelings, my fears, and my opinions. I believe that through writing, I'm practicing the 12<sup>th</sup> Step. I feel like I'm giving back every time I publish an article. During my early recovery, I used writing to help me avoid people, places, and things. It became the tool I used to fill up all the new down time I was getting.

**Gil Gadson:** Writing has also been a major if not central part of my recovery. It has allowed me to fully express my dreams, my desires, my love, my fear, my hopes and wishes, my doubts and my sorrows. I lost my only son in 2007. At that time, I was the editor of a newsletter for The Net. I immediately used my writing as a safety release valve for my pain and as an opportunity to encourage others to push on no matter what. Writing for me is truth and a contract with myself that can never be broken. Writing has played more than a role in my recovery. It has been my most powerful advocacy tool and an anchor.

### **Writing as Service and Advocacy**

**Bill White:** *Describe some of the topics you have addressed in your writing and why these were particularly important to you.*

**Tom Qualters:** Most of the things I write about are issues that I'm going through at the present time or things I've already gone through. When I sit down to write, I do it because something just happened in my life that I think would be interesting to my peers. I started to write about "stigma" when I found out that our local AA meetings were not allowing anyone on methadone to speak during the meeting because they didn't consider us "clean." I wrote about "dealing with

death in recovery” because a person I knew who was struggling in recovery passed away from an overdose. I write a lot about “methadone” because of the vast amount of myths that are associated with it. Being on methadone, I feel writing the true facts about this medication will ultimately educate people who are on the fence about their recovery and are considering medication-assisted treatment.

**Brooke Feldman:** As somebody who is very much in the early stages of focusing their writing in the direction of recovery advocacy, the number of topics I have addressed thus far has been limited. The high level theme has seemed to be evolving toward finding topics that a person in recovery, regardless of their chosen pathway, and a person not in recovery but who seeks or values personal growth can relate to and connect with. I suppose I have begun to see my writing as a means for building bridges across the divides that exist both within the recovery community and in between the recovery community and the broader community at large. This is important to me because I firmly believe that the gifts that a person in recovery, regardless of their chosen pathway, discovers and applies to their life (wisdom, gratitude, humility, service to others, acceptance, tolerance, etc.) are gifts that would improve and give hope to the broader community and world overall. These are the very same gifts that people not in recovery but who are seeking improvement of self and world have been looking. I believe that sharing these gifts can bring together the recovery community and larger society, and I believe that in turn, the larger society will see value in and support recovery.

**Gil Gadson:** In the beginning, my focus was on the simple possibility and beauty of recovery. My next focus was on educating and eradicating stigma and the often narrow, common views of recovery.

**Jose DeLeon:** Some of those topics that I’ve addressed include stigma and how discrimination gets acted out in the medical community, the recovery community, by therapists, the public, by politicians, and even within addiction treatment facilities.

**Bill White:** *What are the most important messages you wish to convey to people seeking or in recovery?*

**Jose DeLeon:** One main message is that there are plenty of tools that are effective in assisting someone in overcoming their active addiction. Just because someone didn’t have success overcoming their addiction through one approach doesn’t mean that they won’t have success trying a different approach. You have to keep trying until you find a treatment approach that works for you. “Drug free” or using an effective medication makes no difference as long as the result is the same and that is living clean and sober from the addictive lifestyle and all that is attached to it.

**Tom Qualters:** I think a central message is that they are NOT bad people and that they aren’t alone. Knowing that someone else out there feels the way you do is an eye opening moment. Knowing that there are other people like you going through the same struggles and successes is sobering. Addiction is the “Almighty Equalizer”; it takes down everyone it comes in contact with despite their education, despite their sex or age, and despite their nationality, it just doesn’t matter, you will lose.

**Gil Gadson:** I want to convey how far those in recovery have come, what is available and ultimately possible, and that we do recover and there is something waiting for us.

**Brooke Feldman:** I agree. I think one of the most important messages I wish to convey to people seeking recovery is that recovery is possible! Spreading hope is, in my opinion, the most effective way to convey this to people seeking recovery. Quite simply, I wish to spread hope to people seeking recovery, and every other message I wish to convey can be found under the “hope umbrella.” One of the most important messages I wish to convey to people in recovery is that recovery is something to be proud of rather than ashamed of, that recovery is an accomplishment to display and share with the world rather than something to hide in your pocket or down in church basements. I wish to convey the message that a higher act of being in service to others requires us extending out beyond the recovery community to the community at large. I wish to convey the message that recovery is a heroic journey that finds completion in the act of recovering people bestowing the gifts that they discovered onto the larger community.

**Bill White:** *What other recovery-related activities complement your recovery advocacy writing?*

**Tom Qualters:** One of the activities I’m committed to is “The Family Group”; this group is run by people in recovery. It runs every Saturday morning from 10-12. What we try to do is educate family members and loved ones about the truths of addiction and recovery. We attempt to dispel myths and alleviate any concerns they have about medication-assisted treatment. This group has become a great source of topics to write about and has also become one of our best tools for education. I see firsthand how addiction devastated these families.

**Jose DeLeon:** Well, we are involved with a few activities here within Net-Steps. One would be our “Reaching out through Recovery,” which is our Annual Homeless Coat Drive. We use this opportunity to not only hand out warm coats and blankets to our brothers and sisters but also speak to them about entering treatment or at least giving it another try. Like Tom, I am involved in our Saturday morning Family Group where we educate family members about their loved one who is presently receiving treatment here at Net-Steps. We talk to them about addiction, therapy, and medication. We educate them on the truth of methadone drawn from science verses third-hand rumors or negative opinions.

**Brooke Feldman:** The keys for me are being an active member of the recovery community as the result of my own personal recovery, remaining connected to the work of recovery community organizations in the area, continuing to facilitate trainings for people in recovery seeking to enter the field and give back, and my work for the City of Philadelphia’s Office of Addiction Services. All of these activities inform and complement my writing.

**Gil Gadson:** Along with writing, I also speak to groups of people and facilitate groups. I try to always make these interactive and not lectures where I’m “telling” as opposed to us all experiencing something together. I use stories, humor, facts, the current holistic climate of recovery, and real life experiences told by real people that demonstrate limitless possibilities.

**Bill White:** *How do you see your writing activities fitting into the larger recovery transformation processes underway within your organizations?*

**Brooke Feldman:** I work for Philadelphia's Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services' (DBHIDS) Office of Addiction Services (OAS), and within this organization, there exist many ways that my writing activities can align with the larger recovery transformation processes already underway. Since the arrival of Dr. Arthur C. Evans in 2004, our behavioral health system here in Philadelphia has undergone a significant transformation toward what has become an internationally highlighted recovery-oriented system of care. As a person who entered recovery in 2005 and began working in the behavioral health field in 2006, my experience of Philadelphia's behavioral health system transformation can be viewed from a number of different perspectives. I can see and write from the perspective of a person in recovery searching for and finding the resources and supports helpful to sustaining long-term recovery. I can also see and write from the perspective of a person in recovery who found opportunities for service and giving back through providing and managing peer-based recovery support services within our system, as well as working in other components of our addiction treatment and recovery housing system. And lastly, I can see and write from the perspective of DBHIDS' role in policy making, administration and oversight, and the establishment of Practice Guidelines for providing services in a recovery-oriented system of care. Having this unique blend of various perspectives with which to view the overall transformation of our system and the ability to document and articulate it is certainly one way my writing activities can fit within the larger scope. Overall, the opportunity to work directly under the leadership of Dr. Evans and Office of Addiction Services' Director Roland Lamb, in addition to previously working under Beverly Haberle of PRO-ACT, has certainly helped mold a perspective for my pen in regards to journaling the larger recovery transformation here in Philadelphia.

**Gil Gadson:** The most important things to share to me are the ways people generally see and don't see recovery. Many people in recovery who have others who support them have nothing in hand to show in terms of their goals, their progress, and dreams. At my organization, besides the regular things we do, there is a renewed effort focusing on family inclusion, which is a key factor in the recovery transformation process. We are recognizing and focusing on significant others' concerns as well as the participants' concerns.

**Bill White:** *What role do you think writing has played and can play in the future of the new recovery advocacy movement?*

**Jose DeLeon:** A HUGE ROLE. We are the voices of thousands upon thousands!! All that I see positive/negative I write about with hopes that it will influence policy, speeches, and approaches to all things involving addiction and treatment. I know that when certain articles are written about things that are going on in Net-Steps, like gossip amongst therapists, these are addressed in the next staff meeting. Of course, those that are guilty give me funny looks, but the article did its job. I do think our writing can have influence on this and other issues on a much larger scale.

**Gil Gadson:** Along with what is actually done in real time, the written word can be saved, shared, and transported at any given time. Often, participants' significant others do not have a clue as to what actually goes on when their loved ones go into recovery. Written evidence can be

invaluable when the participants take the time to record their feelings, hopes, and desires through the written word. Confidence and appreciation of effort (by both parties) can be realized also when participants write and empower themselves. Virtually every time someone sees his or her writing and thoughts in print, they are thrilled and filled with a sense of pride and accomplishment.

**Tom Qualters:** Today with the advent of multimedia, I believe that the future is wide open. What we write in the morning can be around the world and translated into 10 different languages by this afternoon. Through writing and multimedia, we are able to reach people anywhere and at any time. When someone in recovery is going through depression at 3 o'clock in the morning in Ireland, they are able to read an article from someone in Philadelphia who went through the same thing and find out what helped them through it. We are no longer limited to our geographical location.

### **Challenges and Joys of Recovery Journalism**

**Bill White:** *What challenges have you faced trying to reach readers across the silos in which recovery communities are organized?*

**Jose DeLeon:** Some challenges are that many recovering individuals still think that they know all that there is about recovery and treatment. Many of those "recovery communities" won't bother reading anything in our newsletter because they know that it is from that "Methadone Clinic," and this is true even outside of the recovery community. "Recovery magazines" never seem to print any articles that thoroughly explain medication-assisted treatment's effectiveness. Discrimination within the "recovery community" makes expanding our base a little more difficult but more worthwhile or rewarding.

**Brooke Feldman:** It is difficult at times to reach readers across the silos in which recovery communities are organized. The many different pathways to recovery can at times philosophically conflict with one another and make it difficult to reach audiences from multiple pathways at one time. I find that within some of the more popular 12-Step mutual aid communities, there can be a lack of support and a heavy stigma around other pathways to recovery. There is sort of an "our way is the only way" type of mindset. This can be difficult to maneuver around when wishing to acknowledge that there are in fact multiple pathways to long-term recovery! One example of this challenge is the following: Unfortunately at this moment in our recovery movement, if one attempts to be inclusive of those using medication as part of their recovery journey while addressing the 12-Step audience, they will likely still find difficulty in receiving such a message with open-mindedness and acceptance. Conversely, those using medication as part of their recovery journey have faced so much stigma from the 12-Step communities that there can be difficulty in these folks finding value and worth in anything coming from the 12-Step perspective. Overall, it remains a challenge at times to write one piece geared toward people in recovery as a whole in a manner that does not leave one of the silos or subsets of recovering people feeling excluded or alienated. I find that it is comparable to an attempt at reaching into and grabbing a group of spiritual people who practice a variety of different religions. While the specific traditions, practices, and dogmas of each particular religion will differ and at times be in conflict with one another, there are certain unifying themes

and truths that will resonate with all. I suppose the goal of the writer in our case is to capture those unifying themes and truths that unite the recovery communities rather than those which divide us.

**Tom Qualters:** To be honest with you, when we started to put out “The Net-Work,” it was meant to be a publication for the 400+ clients in this clinic alone. I never actively tried to reach further than that, but through word of mouth and posting it on our website/Facebook, it seems to have grown legs of its own. We have gotten compliments from California to New York. I guess we’re doing it the old fashioned way. I’m happy if I get one new reader a month as long as they are learning something. For me, a little step is still a step forward.

**Gil Gadson:** Different entities all have their own ways and beliefs in running their facilities and promoting and executing their initiatives. These initiatives can be fueled by the needs of the participants and can be expanded and/or limited by resources and available networks within the recovery community. The challenge is in convincing others of the benefits of sharing on a broader scope. Some in recovery still feel that their journey and story is private and initially may be resistant to sharing their life experiences.

**Bill White:** *Some of you have tried to address stigma related to medication (and particularly methadone) and recovery through your writings.*

**Tom Qualters:** The NET newsletter was born from a particular incident that happened to one of my peers. Because of that incident, the topic of our first issue was stigma. This man attended an AA meeting faithfully for about three years. He volunteered his time and money, he stayed to help clean up after every meeting, and he even worked the coffee bar. Needless to say, he was respected at the place. Well, somehow it got out that he was on methadone, he was told that he could no longer share during the meetings, and he couldn’t sponsor anyone because he was in their view still on drugs (methadone). I can honestly say that this is the incident that started my writing crusade about stigma. I just want people to know the TRUTH and the FACTS. If they still feel the same way about it after that, at least they made an educated decision.

**Gil Gadson:** Stigma in recovery is what I call our archenemy. Stigma walks hand in hand with ignorance and, pardoning my humorous opinion, they seem to be indispensable to one another. The taking of any medication is often not taken advantage of and/or can be abused. Methadone in particular can carry a negative connotation amongst the populace due to misuse, ignorance, complacency, stigmas, and a general, uninformed view. Through the publications, I’ve tried to educate and show the individual in real time in relation to their challenges and journey, hopefully helping others to take a deeper look at the individual and not generalize. The real life examples always have a greater and immeasurable impact.

**Jose DeLeon:** Our Family Group is one of our most powerful weapons when addressing stigma. Parents come into this group like anyone else that is misinformed about medication-assisted treatment. They are filled with stigma. We encourage them to ask as many questions as they need to ask until they feel that their questions have been thoroughly answered. We answer any and all myths that they may have heard with facts, which we have learned through our own research of the facts. Many of these parents go out and find themselves in situations where they share these

newly learned facts with others, and then they come back the following weekend to share their experience with us. On January 30<sup>th</sup>, I went to a community meeting hosted by State Rep. Kevin Boyle, which was titled “Methadone facilities and their impact on a community.” I went with another recovering person and passed out papers that covered the true influence that a well-run facility has on any community. I also spoke with reporters from WHYY & KYW about factual information regarding treatment and how communities and politicians agree that people need treatment but “not in my backyard.” We also have a presentation titled “brain disease” in which we go to each group in this building and educate our peers and therapists about the facts of addiction being a brain disease. So, we are always at work to educate others, which will hopefully phase out stigma someday.

**Bill White:** *What challenges have some of you faced in recruiting others to write for your recovery-related publications?*

**Tom Qualters:** That part was difficult in the beginning. It seemed like there was a huge line drawn down the middle of the clinic. On one side was “us” (clients) and on the other “them” (administration, counselors). I was stuck in the middle because I have the dual role of client and employee. It was almost like people didn’t want to participate because they didn’t want to cross that imaginary line. I had people tell me that they wanted to write something, but they didn’t want to put their names on it. Unfortunately, I also had people who wanted to write but didn’t know how. I found myself doing a lot of extra work in the beginning because I would offer my assistance to anyone who wanted to write. The first year, I rewrote a lot of articles from people because I thought what they had to say was important. After about a year, I started getting other people popping their heads in the office asking if they could write something. Now I just keep my ear open while outside or in the waiting room; I listen for people who seem like they have something to say. I have no problem approaching people and asking if they would be interested in writing something for the newsletter.

**Jose DeLeon:** It is a constant challenge. Just recently, we have about five more people who are starting to submit articles that they’ve written for our newsletter. Their reasons for not writing are normally excuses, which sound like this: they don’t have the time; they don’t really know what to write about; they don’t know how to put how they feel on paper in the right words, etc. Tom and I just continue to write about the topics that we’re interested in and people are beginning to slowly peek their heads in the office with interest. Other than our Net-Steps newsletter, there aren’t too many outlets that will publish material written by people on methadone. So we really have our work cut out for us, but it’s all worth it.

**Gil Gadson:** The complication in getting others to write usually lies in their own reluctance due to self-doubt in terms of expressing themselves well and the revelation of what they deem as private truths about their life experiences. For some, these revelations can change things such as perspective and in some instances, even their relationships with significant others.

**Bill White:** *How do you address questions about anonymity and writing by and for persons in recovery?*

**Brooke Feldman:** For my column published in the *12 Step Gazette*, a magazine certainly geared toward individuals using the 12-Step pathway to recovery that promotes the concept of anonymity, my by-line includes my full name rather than just “Brooke F.” This for me was a symbolic way of moving away from the concept of personal anonymity and to show that I do not wish to mask my identity as a person in recovery. When asked by others if this “conflicts with the 12 Traditions” of the popular 12-Step mutual aid programs such as NA or AA, my response has been that so long as I do not proclaim my membership to one specific 12-Step mutual aid program at the level of press, radio, or film, then I am not in violation of the 12 Traditions. In my writing and at the level of radio or film, I identify as Brooke M. Feldman, a person in long-term recovery, rather than as Brooke F., member of AA or NA. I am actually happy to oblige answering any questions around anonymity because it opens up the door to a conversation on the subject and an opportunity to discuss the reasons why I find it important for people in recovery, whenever possible, to NOT remain anonymous. To sum up my reasoning for why it is important for people in recovery to not remain anonymous, the number one talking point for me is the following: The recovery community is a significantly large and powerful group of transformed and insightful individuals who, if heard as one voice in this world, could absolutely influence positive change in a way never seen before. So long as we stay in the shadows, our voices remain unheard and our light unseen – and this is a disservice to ourselves and the world.

**Gil Gadson:** As far as anonymity and writing for those in recovery, I always stress that while this is immeasurably beneficial for all involved, it is a choice – their choice, to participate or not. They can sign their name or be anonymous.

**Jose DeLeon:** I haven’t experienced such a thing. I don’t have a problem with putting my whole name on any article that I write. I am glad to be in this recovery process and therefore am not ashamed to use my name.

**Tom Qualters:** It’s funny, but I have a couple people who write for me every month but still feel uncomfortable using their real names. I’m okay with that, as long as what they write has a positive message or shines a light on a wrong (stigma). People do ask “who wrote this article,” but I won’t divulge that information out of respect to the person writing it.

**Bill White:** *What do you feel best about regarding your writing to date and the responses it has elicited?*

**Tom Qualters:** I feel the same about every article I write. As long as I feel I got my point across, I consider it a good article. I don’t think one article is better than another. Everything I write has a little part of “me” in it. As far as the responses to date, I’m always surprised and humbled when someone tells me that I did a good job or that they liked my article. It does make me happy now knowing that the newsletter isn’t just limited to this facility. It’s always an ego booster when you get an email from a leading author in the addictions field saying that they enjoyed your article and keep up the good work.

**Jose DeLeon:** Lately, it has been what I have written about the discrimination by State Representatives, Council-people, and other elected officials and their supporters. Pointing out how they continue to scare those misinformed people of their districts with nothing more than

lies, myths, and stigma while people are dying because they can't get into treatment as a result of these people voting against letting treatment centers open up in their communities. I'm proud of the support that my articles gain but would rather have people act on what they read in my writing verses saying, "another good job."

**Gil Gadson:** The thing that I feel best about so far is the trust that has been bestowed upon me when others open up and the tremendous impact it has on others who read their true stories. It's also a joy to see an individual read their words in print and watch their chest swell with pride and a feeling of accomplishment. They often want a number of copies to proudly share with loved ones and family.

**Brooke Feldman:** Surprisingly, it is my short recovery-related rhymes that I've used social networking sites to get out, which have elicited the greatest response and generated the most feedback. What I feel best about regarding this is that there is a fairly evenly dispersed audience of people in recovery and people not in recovery who have expressed enjoying these inspirational rhymes.

Additionally, I have gotten much feedback around the need to "do something more" with my gift. It feels good to know that a pretty decent number of folks, including some individuals who I look up to and admire, genuinely see talent and potential in my writing.

## **Writing Process**

**Bill White:** *How did you overcome your own fear of writing out your recovery experience?*

**Tom Qualters:** In the beginning, I was very scared writing about my addiction and my experiences as an addict. I was able to hide my addiction for a very long time, and it was difficult for me to shine the light on myself and let everyone into my life. Over time, I would get people saying to me that they could relate to my story or they would say "the same thing happened to me." That made me feel like I wasn't alone in the way I thought. I started to realize that drug addiction was the "ultimate equalizer." It brings everyone to their knees. After that, it became easier to write about my personal recovery experience. As time goes on, I think all of us who write for the newsletter are becoming stronger in our writing ability.

**Jose DeLeon:** With each article, I believe that I became more relaxed. The fear of how I would come across to any reader; would I sound smart enough or educated in the smallest of ways, those types of things, would float further away with each new topic. I just knew that I had to keep on writing, which our newsletter has allowed me to do.

**Gil Gadson:** My own fear of writing about my recovery experience was overcome by gaining the knowledge that truth has the power of freeing you and relieving ongoing burdens. I learned that telling my story opened doors to a new and unseen future and that it helped others on their journey.

**Bill White:** *Describe your writing rituals—when, where, how?*

**Brooke Feldman:** My writing process changed once I entered recovery and has continued to evolve. The spontaneous acts of writing that I once experienced now require a little bit more effort and preparation to induce. Additionally, I find that I write far less frequently with a good 'ole pen and piece of paper and more often on the computer. This adaptation has introduced many new quirks into my preparation and writing process. This is still an eclectic, ever-evolving and, as of yet, non-consistent area of my writing. My writing roots go back to more spontaneous bursts of creative writing rather than the concentrated academic writing direction I have moved toward. This latter style of writing requires more of a conscious effort of drawing out from within and I have yet to establish a solid ritual for preparing and going through this process. When I smoked cigarettes, the act of smoking cigarettes was a significant (albeit unhealthy) part of my writing rituals. I have struggled to find an adequate consistent replacement for the spot this filled.

**Tom Qualters:** I always write with a pen and paper, the old fashioned way. After my first handwritten draft, I type it on the computer and print it out. Then I grab the yellow highlighter (must be yellow) and mark everything I don't like. I usually do the retyping and correcting part two times. I need to have my container of iced tea and my iPod; I usually need to have music on, but it isn't relaxing music: its Green Day or Rise Against, etc. I need to have some kind of noise in the room I'm writing in.

**Gil Gadson:** Writing for me is mostly spontaneous. I am inspired daily and often look for things that interest and concern me to comment on. I believe the more you write, the better you get at it. Since my life changed, my priorities changed. My purpose in life directly influences my life, so as I breathe each day, I must write. I write something brief every morning to start my day and set the stage for a grateful, constructive, and positive day. It doesn't matter where I am. I'll type it, use pen and paper, and even record a thought on my phone.

**Jose DeLeon:** The majority of my writing goes on at home because it is just me and my computer. Depending on the topic, I will put certain types of music on that will give a boost to what emotion I want to feel, a lot of which will overflow into my writing. Political topics are normally Bob Marley, Capleton, etc. Treatment issues are normally meditation bells or chanting monks because I need to be in a neutral mental state and allow my fingers to flow. I guess we all have our own set of weird rituals.

**Bill White:** *Are there any techniques you've developed to engage readers in recovery?*

**Jose DeLeon:** No, I'm just me, and some people think that is more than enough.

**Brooke Feldman:** I find that putting thought into what naysayers will be thinking and considering the viewpoints of others outside of my own is a helpful technique to engage readers both in recovery and outside of recovery. More specifically for people in recovery, the technique I often defer to is that of using humor to display truth and to use language that many can identify with.

**Gil Gadson:** I'll often read something creatively to a prospective reader in an attempt to show them the beauty, advantage, fun, and power of words and storytelling.

**Bill White:** *Are there other writers who have inspired you?*

**Gil Gadson:** As a child in grade school, I became fascinated by Edgar Allen Poe. Even though most of his stories were relatively dark, I was totally drawn in and fascinated by his ability to paint pictures and use words like an artist uses color and brush strokes. In my adult life, I like writers who mesh fact and fiction to weave an intriguing, exciting, and interesting tale.

**Tom Qualters:** Many people inspire me. I've been inspired by Jim Carroll, Nietzsche, Jim Morrison, and Emily Dickinson. As I got older, I started to read self-help books by Tony Robbins.

**Jose DeLeon:** Yes, Anthony Robbins, whether others agree with what he does or not, is of no importance to me. His work still inspires, motivates, and encourages people to be more than they are at this very moment. I believe that is powerful, and he helped improve my way of thinking and writing.

**Brooke Feldman:** The writer who most inspired me to write in terms of recovery advocacy work is Bill White. When I first began working for a Recovery Community Organization that was in the start-up phase of operating the first Recovery Community Center in Philadelphia, I was given tons of Bill White material to read. The first paper I read was "Recovery as a Heroic Journey," and I found in it the most profound analogy for the journey of recovery. More importantly, every single word of that paper resonated deep within me. The internal reaction I had to this paper inspired and motivated me to read as much of Bill's work as possible. I would ultimately go on to read *Let's Go Make Some History: Chronicles of the New Addiction Advocacy Movement*. I felt like this book was a personal calling to me, and I knew very early into reading this book that I could and was passionate about contributing to this movement. Lastly, I discovered Bill's *The Call to Write: An Invitation to Aspiring Writers*. This book created and solidified my belief that the independent passions I have for recovery and writing had a place to go and a purpose to carry out together. After reading through this book, I knew that I was truly meant to help carry the torch of writing as a vehicle for recovery advocacy work. I don't know what could have lit the spark of inspiration within me more than that.

**Bill White:** *Is there any writing any of you have done that you would like to retract?*

**Jose DeLeon:** NO, NO, and NO.

**Tom Qualters:** No, not at all, even if I wrote something because I was angry, I wouldn't want to retract it because it's what I felt at that moment. I stand by what I write.

**Gil Gadson:** I honestly have not written anything that I wish to retract. After I write something, I go over it as many times as necessary until I'm satisfied that I reached my objective in communicating a thought.

**Brooke Feldman:** Not yet, but I'm pretty sure that if you ask me this question down the road, it will probably be met with an emphatic yes!

**Bill White:** *Are there other types of recovery-related writing that you would like to explore in the future?*

**Brooke Feldman:** I would like to begin to do more writing for journals and other resources aimed at reaching addiction professionals, and more importantly, I would like to explore ways to reach the public at large. I strongly believe that in order to build communities that are supportive of recovery and to have our voice reach the decision makers around funding for treatment and recovery support services, it is imperative that we begin communicating to those folks outside of the recovery community. My hope is to find ways to use my writing to reach inside of and capture those folks. When I look 5 years down the line, I envision the target audience for my writing being the public at large. Overall, I see the role of my writing being that of a bridge between the recovery community and the addiction professionals and policymakers, and more broadly, I see my writing acting as a bridge between the recovery community and the community and world at large.

**Gil Gadson:** I would like to reach those that are incapacitated, incarcerated, grieving, and victims of trauma, violence, and abuse.

**Jose DeLeon:** I will continue to focus on stigma, discrimination, prejudice, and a holistic healing approach to recovery. I would like to write more things that more people can benefit from and that would inspire others' thinking process. I haven't read ALL of your work, but the things that I have read are good and inspire both Tom and I. Who truly knows, I would have never guessed that I would be doing what I'm doing today. I'm looking forward to what tomorrow brings me.

**Tom Qualters:** I just enjoy writing, so I would be open to any new experiences.

### **Suggestions to Aspiring Writers in Recovery**

**Bill White:** *Is there any advice you would like to give others interested in using writing as a tool of self-exploration and service?*

**Tom Qualters:** Be true to the material you're writing about, research the topic, and don't fill the whole article up with opinion. Have fun while writing, and try to put a little bit of yourself into your work. When I read someone else's work, I like to see a little bit of the author's personality shine through.

**Gil Gadson:** Besides starting a personal journal to get in tune with yourself, I would suggest that interested persons write something each and every day, no matter how big or small. I would suggest that they have a library card and or/use the one they have. I would suggest that they cultivate an interest in reading, be open-minded, and explore as many different topics as possible so as to make your writing well rounded, interesting, and diverse. Also ask yourself if you love communicating, and if so, let your passion to learn, convey, converse, and tell a story become an art that you develop that's evidenced by what you write, who you inspire, and the responses you get. And never stop practicing and learning, there's always room to get better. I can only give

one guarantee and that is that there is a freedom in writing. It can be like medicine, singing a song, breaking chains, gaining friends, and a possible myriad of other things.

**Jose DeLeon:** If a person feels, that person has the power to spark interest, which could lead to something greater. Any individual has the ability to write for both those above mentioned categories but how long it takes for them to realize this gift is another issue. There has always been power in the pen, which we all hold. Learning how to connect our emotions and thoughts to that pen is when that pen comes alive and powerful. Put on some music, clear the room, and allow your fingers to express your thoughts in a positive way. No word returns void.

**Brooke Feldman:** Write, write, write. If you feel called to write, then write! The best advice I have is to identify and utilize mentors who can help inspire, motivate, and guide you.

**Bill White:** Brooke, Jose, Gil, and Tom, thanks to each of you for sharing your experiences as writers who are seeking to heal the world through the power of your words.

**Acknowledgement:** Support for this series of interviews on recovery advocacy, recovery management, and recovery-oriented systems of care has been provided by The Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbilities Services (DBHIDS) and the Great Lakes Addiction Technology Transfer Center (ATTC) through a cooperative agreement from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT). The opinions expressed herein are the view of the authors and do not reflect the official position of DBHIDS, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), SAMHSA or CSAT.